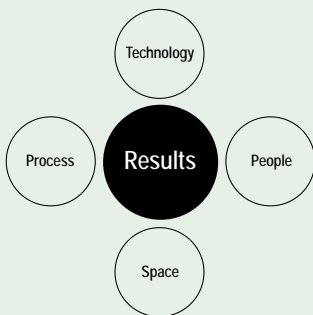


Workplace Building Blocks

Balance Privacy

There are sound business reasons for treating your work environment as a strategic asset... regarding it on the same plane with people, business processes, and technology.



As a strategic asset, the workplace must function as a high performance environment that seamlessly integrates architecture, furniture and technology through insightful planning.

The following discussion centers on Balancing Privacy. It is one of six workplace building blocks that enables you to plan and create a workplace that becomes a critical management tool, supporting the corporate strategies that have a direct impact on your business results.

Exploring the Issue of "Balancing Privacy"

Over the past ten years, with the increased emphasis on "knowledge work," the issue of privacy in the workplace has crept back into prominence.

Knowledge workers typically handle a variety of tasks throughout the day; some require very little privacy, others require a lot.

So "balance" is required. Balancing privacy means providing every worker the level of privacy required to get their job done as efficiently and productively as possible.

In the typical open plan environment, finding work areas that provide adequate levels of privacy can be a real challenge. And privacy wears many faces. Consider the typical office environment:

Acoustical Privacy

Phones ring, people drop by; conversation levels modulate; spontaneous meetings occur; file drawers slam; and more phones ring. All are assaults on acoustical privacy.

Visual Privacy

Visual distractions – including normal foot traffic, sudden movements, and unexpected sights – account for an inability to really concentrate.

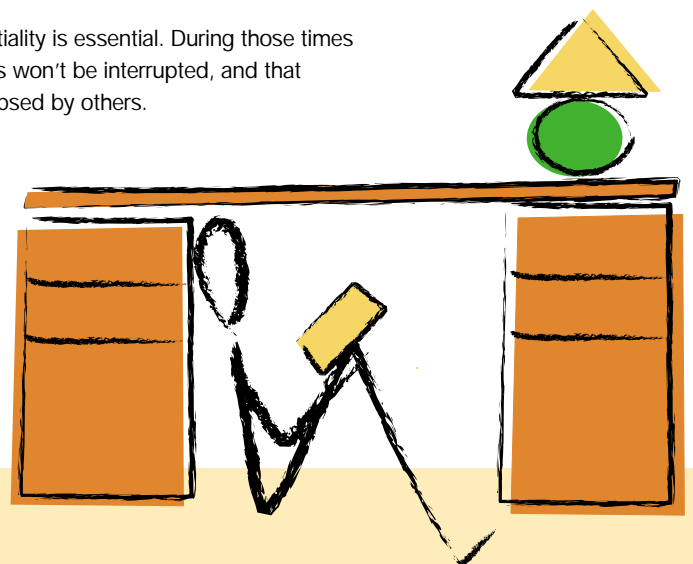
Territorial Privacy

There is a natural inclination among workers – both individuals and groups – to stake a claim on certain spaces. "That's our space." "That's my space." And trespassing can cause stress to either party.

Informational Privacy

In many business situations, confidentiality is essential. During those times people need to feel that their meetings won't be interrupted, and that confidential information won't be glimpsed by others.

Keep in mind... the culture of an organization has a significant impact on workers' ability to negotiate for the right level of privacy. People need to trust that they have the freedom to wear headphones, put up "do not disturb" signs, or use other privacy techniques to do their work.



In a recent Steelcase survey (HotHouse Seminar, 2001), 57% of respondents indicated a preference for an environment that is away from the distraction of other people to get their work done.

How To Think About It

Since no two people have exactly the same job, the first task is to determine how much privacy is *really* necessary for each person (and each group) in order for work to be done well.

Be prepared... debate over the need for public and private spaces can be challenging because privacy is such a personal issue. For some people, nothing short of four walls and a door will suffice; for others it's less important because they have a natural way of blocking out most distractions.

The bottom line is that your work environment needs to support every person and all the different ways they work:

- Too much privacy can result in isolation and feelings of being disconnected; it hinders interaction, relationship-building, and the development and sharing of new ideas.
- Too much interaction can lead to low productivity.

The key is finding the right balance between the work that needs to be done and negotiating the range of privacy that's reasonably available.

What To Measure

Choose a test group, then take an informal poll:

- Find out where every individual in your group goes when they need privacy (e.g., conference room, empty office, library, cafeteria, home, nearby coffee shop).
- Ask about the types of work being done in your group. Determine the ratio of private space to public areas; measure the amount of space available for individual and group/team work
- Make an evaluation as to whether the available space is consistent with the expressed needs.

This information will help you examine the levels and types of privacy (acoustical, visual, territorial or even informational) needed in your work environment.

How To Experiment with Change

Think about temporarily re-apportioning your existing public and private space to better accommodate privacy needs. Also consider:

- adding privacy screens or stacking panels to home bases and open team areas
- improving acoustics via sound masking throughout your work environment
- devising a signaling system to indicate a need for quiet work areas or enclaves
- introducing behavioral protocols (rules, guidelines, standards) to reduce excessive noise

Evaluate the Investment

Remember, one of the six building blocks of a high performance work environment is the ability to satisfy the level of privacy people say they need to do their work most effectively.

If you're interested in using this or any of the other building blocks to help define or redesign your work environment – by strategically integrating the architecture, furniture, and technology used by your people – let us help.

For more in-depth information on balancing privacy, see the Steelcase knowledge papers at www.steelcase.com; Tools and Insights.

- *Workplace Privacy: A Changing Equation (S10645)*
- *Workplace Acoustics: A Discussion of Sound, Noise, and Effective Work (S10564)*
- *Working at Home (S10579)*

